LATE ANTIQUE / COPTIC AND ISLAMIC TEXTILES OF EGYPT

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WITH INTRODUCTION
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AND
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100 PLATES

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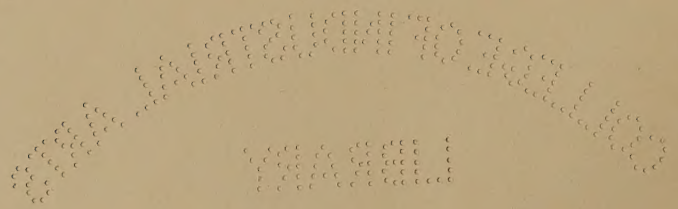

LATE ANTIQUE AND COPTIC FABRICS. / Late antique and early mediaeval Egyptian fabrics have not been long appreciated. In contrast to the interest given to the art of the Empires of the Pharaohs, scientific investigation has concerned itself only for the last few decades with the Egyptian Christian era and its inhabitants—the Coptics. The first discoveries of such late antique and mediaeval fabrics in Egypt were entirely accidental and occurred in connection with the investigation of old Egyptian monuments. Shortly after, however, interest was taken in the fabrics themselves and one began opening the great early Christian burial places along the Nile and preserving the fabrics found therein. As a consequence of the dry desert sands and the special climatic conditions, the garments of the dead and the blankets which were given them were found to be in excellent condition. Unfortunately, the first ones found were cut up in small pieces and therefore it is only seldom that entire garments are preserved. The silk trimmings especially, which were put on as adornment, had been ripped from the shirts. In this manner, remnants came into the possession of all the more important European museums and recently of the American as well.

The Museum in Turin is in possession of the earliest found fabrics. The first systematic excavations were undertaken by the Berlin Museums. Professor Schweinfurth in 1886 investigated the tombs of Arsinoë and found great quantities of fabrics. The discoveries of Graf in Sakkarah, were taken to Vienna, and of C. Schmidt in Antinoë followed hereupon. The latter disclosed a number of extremely important well preserved complete garments with silk trimmings and also shirts of Persian cut and simple wool fabrics. Their excavations were continued by Gayet and what he found the Guimet-Museum in Paris received for the most part. The abundance of all sorts of knitted woollen fabrics dating from the 3—7 centuries is astounding.

The most extensive excavations were undertaken by Forrer at Achmim-Panapolis. They brought to light all sorts of textiles: silk fabrics and woven and knitted textiles from the earliest Hellenistic examples to the period of

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Islamic art. Today they are scattered throughout the world. The Museums of Berlin, Brussels, Trier and London as well as the Nissen collection in Cologne contain examples thereof.

These fabrics were at first called Coptic after the Christian population of Egypt the "copts". However, study soon proved that a part of the fabrics still maintained the pure antique-hellenistic form and certainly were of the 3rd century of the Christian Era at least.

Among these early hellenistic fabrics there is a group technically interesting because of the nap. The theme here consists of figures principally antique allegorical—very realistically executed—and of ornamental patterns. The rather large patterns of figures and ornaments—especially of large tapestries and of complete rugs—are very often executed in a sort of Gobeline technique. The most beautiful examples of these with dancing girls and hermaphrodites, as well as a large church tapestry such as we are familiar with from the representations of Ravenna Mosaic are in the possession of the Berlin Museum.

The largest group of fabrics still preserved, especially shirt insertions are knitted in purple. The earliest discoveries especially show this technique. The oldest patterns with vines, grapeleaves as ornaments, or with small children—Christian themes at this time being very seldom—are still under the influence of the hellenistic tradition. The Coptic influence exerted itself slowly on this group of fabrics and it was only in about the 6th century that pure Coptic style is to be found. The Coptic element can be recognized especially in a stronger emphasizing of conformity to style and in the transformation of figures to ornaments. The influence of Syrian and Sassanian fabrics is also an element of this innovation.

At the same time, together with the Hellenistic purple knittings, a great number of coloured fabrics with Hellenistic themes are to be found. There are patterns with blossoms, small children with fruit baskets, dancing girls and circus scenes, at times in bold colour combinations. As early as the 4 to 5th century a change is caused by Coptic elements. Among the pieces already partially with formal designs, those with figures—especially with Christian scenes, such as the worship of the three wise men, the miracles of Christ and the Saints—are interesting. These at times show clearly that they were taken from Syrian

originals, especially silks. The decorative pieces also show plainly their origin from Sassanian art. Here there is that great love of colour which was so characteristic of old Egyptian art and which now once more reappears.

Of great interest is the technique of the fabrics. While in Hellenistic fabrics wool knitting on linen predominates, a new and interesting technique arose from the 5th century. Wool woven materials in two colours are artistically very beautiful. The patterns show fighting horsemen and simple ornaments. There is very seldom embroidery. This belongs to the late era as do also the printed fabrics. The themes of these latter, excepting several early coloured pieces with figures, almost always show reminiscences of Islamic art.

Silk trimmings were preferred for elegant garments. Technically speaking, knitted material is to be found now and then among the silk fabrics. The majority are, however, woven. The tombs of Achmim and Antinoë especially have furnished examples of this latter kind. A strong Sassanian influence—chiefly in the patterns with figures—can be observed in Antinoë. The ornamental themes are usually simple geometrical disseminated patterns; themes of ornaments as well as of figures are also to be found in the silk fabrics of Achmim. These bear in part the inscription "Zacharias" and in several cases "Joseph". They are two-coloured. Probably the Coptic silk-weaving was influenced by the pieces imported from Syria and Persia, perhaps in part also by the workmen taken from there. Thus in several pieces with horsemen and fighters with lions the Syrian origin can easily be seen.

The fabrics offer the historical student of manners and customs rich material in so far as the subject of national costume is concerned. Especially in the tombs of Antinoë it was possible to study in detail on the dead the manner of dress. The dead were completely dressed for the grave with shoes, trousers, gaiters, shirts and coats.

The earliest Hellenistic garments are simple rectangular white tunics with rectangular or round purple insertions at the shoulders and the knees, longitudinal stripes (clavae) over the breast and borders on the hem. They show themes of figures as well as of ornaments. In Coptic times the insertions were more extensive and covered a large part of the tunic. Finally it became customary to cover the whole garment with rich designs of ornaments or figures.

When Persian art came into Egypt in the 5 to 6th century, the cut of the garments was changed and made similar to the originals. A side piece cut on the bias was added to the tunic which was cut in the shape of a bell. The sleeves were made narrow in front. Alongside of this long mantles are to be found, held together over the breast with cords. Cowls as head coverings and caps with fillet embroidery have also been found. W. F. V.

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ISLAMIC FABRICS FROM EGYPTIAN GRAVES. / Remnants of Islamic garments and cloths were frequently found in the same graves in which Coptic textiles were discovered. This is explained by the fact that, even after the beginning of the Christian era, the burial places very often remained unchanged. Unfortunately, the unsystematic manner of exploitation, which could not afterwards be scientifically checked entirely destroyed the various layers and local divisions of the periods. In the same way the statements of dealers as to the origin of the individual pieces can only be accepted with the greatest caution. An exact determination of the date of the various groups of Islamic material is extremely difficult as soon as products, not of the decorative arts but of objects made in the homes, enter the question. These latter are generally based on the technique and themes of an old tradition and repeat, unchanged, the same forms for many hundred years. That is especially true of a great mass of embroideries where it is very difficult to differentiate exactly between Coptic, Fatimide and Mameluke products.

The knitted materials, which compose the main part of the textile discoveries in Egypt can with more certainty be assigned to a definite period and are also of more importance from the point of view of the history of art. They can be looked upon as a direct continuation of Coptic technique, improved however, in so far as the patterns were worked in silk on extremely fine linen. The organization of state shops (Tirâz) which had evidently been carried out early, caused the development to be continuous. Furthermore, the new orders placed or the demands made by the court of the caliph, by princes, governors and others in powerful positions, made certain the richest unfolding of artistic possibilities. The textile centres in the Delta of the Nile, of which Tinnis was

of prime importance, sent out to the whole Mohammedan world, well up into the 12th century, fine linen garments with decorative stripes. The monuments of art of the various countries offer examples of how the fashion of Tirâz borders, especially in the form of sleeve insertions became popular everywhere. At first, figures of animals, drawn on a large scale, following the Coptic preliminary stage, appear to have been used. The Islamic influence was already plainly evident, through the departure from naturalism and through a greater conventionalization of designs. Alongside of these, the first examples of textile epigraphy are to be found in dedications to the reigning caliphs, effectively worked in heavy cufic letters in contrast to the back-ground. In the period of the Talunides, the ornamental cross-cut pattern is reflected in several interesting borders which are, in themselves, conspicuous in the materials preserved. This pattern also came to Egypt as the Abbasidian imperial style and was employed for the stucco decorations of the moschee Ibn Tulun.

The great cultural development, which the land of the Nile experienced under the Fatimides, thanks to its exceptional political and religious position and the artistic interests of its rulers since the end of the 10th century, was the golden age of the technique.

The products of the 11 century are characterized by a scale of shades greatly enlarged and exhibiting a fine sense of colour. The inscriptions appear in elegant ornamentative Cufi, the delicate narrow letters braided with one another and intertwined with flourishes and vines. Various figures of animals placed in circles or squares as in coats-of-arms or alongside one another as if in procession, give life to the whole decoration.

The production seems to have increased in steady measure with the beginning of the 12th century. Apparently the special court privileges, which were in force up to that time, were done away with as all Tirâz products became, from that time, articles of luxury available to everybody. In any case, the finds clearly indicate that knitting had at last been brought to such a state of perfection that it easily overcame all technical difficulties and was able to satisfy all demands of an unheard of increased love of luxury. One was no longer satisfied with single decorative borders. Ever larger surfaces were covered with minute "tapisserie" in broad borders hemmed with narrow edges, in

such a way that only here and there, in between, the linen back-ground could be seen.

In choice of themes, however, such high demands were not made. The principal stripes are usually intersected by entwined narrower wavy stripes, between which, as fillers, rather small figures of animals appear. These are almost always hares and ducks, in various compositions, it is true, but nevertheless preferred to such a degree that a plausible explanation is still lacking for the time being. In the accompanying borders and often in separate medaillons of the main piece, inscriptions are to be found. These no longer consist of formal eulogies of the caliphs or sultans, but are generally pious mottos repeated in a stereotyped manner, twined around without plan and often defaced to such an extent that they cannot be deciphered.

So far as the colouring is concerned, the end in view is no longer to liven up a large surface of linen in a modest manner, but to secure a strong and uniform impression of tone. The steady application of brilliant golden yellow indicates how great a rôle the latter played in the desire for pure display.

Shortly after the fall of the Fatimides, the production of knitted materials ceased rather suddenly. Apparently the introduction of the art of weaving brocades, after Chinese pattern, especially patronized by several of the Mameluke sultans, caused the old workshops which could no longer compete, to be closed. A few examples worked in a silk back-ground which can be traced back to the 13th century are clearly the last despairing attempts to compete with woven patterns in external delicacy and regularity of drawing.

There is a great number of pieces of embroidery of Islamic origin which were found in the graves. Several well preserved garments give the much desired information as to the extent and manner of the usual decoration. The stuff here was almost always linen and the material used for embroidering silk. The work was done in plain, chain or cross-stitch; in other words, in the technique used by most peoples of ancient times. It is hardly possible to determine with exactness the date of one or other of these processes. Furthermore, it is to be considered that as a rule, it is not the product of guilds of handicraft men, but of handiwork of women at home, and manufactured to meet the necessities of the household. As already mentioned, this falls

under the category of "folk-art". Certainly, a large part of the material can be determined as still of the epoch of the Fatimides. A few small groups can be definitely assigned to this period. In most cases, however, it can be assumed that the patterns continued into the late Mameluke period where it is almost impossible to assign a relative chronological order.

The loose irregular cross-stitch was preferred especially, with decorative stripes of one colour in black, blue or red. This was combined with small, often extremely charmingly-designed animals in geometrical pattern, trees, ornaments and letters generally only decoratively used. A few samples, very similar to those preserved in Germany, from the Middle-Ages, give an excellent idea of the wealth of those existing at that time.

The chain-stitch, which was naturally more often used in making curved outlines, showed itself to best advantage in richly coloured embroidery with themes of animals and ornaments. Almost all of these pieces can be dated back to the Fatimide period.

Interesting attempts in copying were often made with the plain-stitch. Especially to be mentioned are a number of fine woollen pieces, the decoration of which is worked in material (linen, silk, or cotton) of several colours in absolutely horizontal stitches and which are only seen to be embroideries after careful examination. In other cases the back-ground of the pattern was worked so uniformly and with such fine needlework that one at first takes them to be heavily-woven silks.

Among the mediaeval woven materials, even those found in the Egyptian tombs, there is a large number which must be considered as imported from foreign countries. It is easily possible to distinguish a Chinese and a Sicilian group, and a third sort of silk which shows Asiatic themes in Islamic style with Arabian inscriptions. The latter is probably of Mesopotamian or Syrian origin. Light silks especially, striped or plaided with large and small checks, are present in great numbers. The designs are various and are such as could only be made with the help of the shuttle. Their manufacture in Egypt is confirmed by their relation to Fatimide embroidery, as can be unmistakably seen here and there, and by the presence of similar ground patterns in many knitted linen stuffs. In a few cases in this group, stripes of conventionalized

plants and animal themes are also to be found. Heavy Mameluke brocades with Naskhi epigraphy of a large size and a richness of botanical decorative forms, which characterize this epoch, are noticeably seldom found in the graves. In the case of such specimens the question still remains open as to whether they are products of a workshop of Cairo or Damascus.

The last kind of materials, which have a technical peculiarity of their own, are the printed stuffs, all of which probably belong to the Fatimide period. Several printing blocks, in partly different colours, were pressed in regular order on the linen back-ground. An individual decorative style gives these pieces their special charm. The direct origin of the process, as well as that of knitting, is to be found in the Coptic period. E. K.

DESCRIPTION OF PLATES

A. LATE ANTIQUE AND COPTIC FABRICS FROM EGYPT.

1. Wall carpet, knitted wool on linen—Hellenistic, III-IV century
2. Wall carpet—Hellenistic, III-IV century
3. Curtain—Late Hellenistic, I-IV century
4. Curtain (or shroud), with picture—Hellenistic, III-IV century
5. Curtain (or shroud), with picture—Hellenistic, III-IV century
6. Curtain—Hellenistic, III-IV century (left). Curtain and ornamental border—Late Hellenistic, IV-V century (right).
7. Garment insert and ornamental border—Late Hellenistic, IV-V century
8. Wall carpet. Knitted wool on linen—Late Hellenistic, V-VI century
9. Drapery or insert of silk. Knitted wool on linen—Coptic, V-VI century
10. Ornamental borders of curtains or shrouds—Late Hellenistic, V century
11. Curtain or shroud—Hellenistic, IV century
12. Ornamental insert. Knitted wool on linen—Late Hellenistic, IV century
13. Border of a curtain, Gobelin technique—Hellenistic, IV-V century
14. Late antique woollen knitted work on linen, VI century
15. Tunic—Late Hellenistic, IV-V century
16. Ornamental border, Gobelin technique—Hellenistic, III-IV century
17. Pictured insert, Gobelin technique—Hellenistic, III-IV century
18. Garment insert and ornamental borders—Late Hellenistic, IV-V century
19. Garment inserts—Late Hellenistic, IV-V century
20. Curtain (or shroud), Gobelin technique—Coptic, V century
21. Cloth with pattern, Gobelin technique—Late Hellenistic, IV-V century
22. Garment inserts—Late Hellenistic, IV-V century
23. Ornamental borders—Late Hellenistic and Coptic, IV-V century
24. Pictured insert, Gobelin technique—Coptic, from Achmim. V-VI century
25. Pictured insert, Gobelin technique—Late Hellenistic, IV-V century
26. Tunic—Coptic. V century

27. Tunics—Coptic. V-VI century
28. Coptic knitted woollen work. V-VI century
29. Knitted woollen work—Late Hellenistic. V-VI century
30. Garment inserts and ornamental borders—Late Hellenistic, IV-VI century
31. Garment inserts and ornamental borders—Coptic, V-VI century
32. Remnant of fabric with motive—Late Hellenistic, IV-V century
33. Ornamental stripe of a mantle—Hellenistic, III-IV century
34. Garment inserts and borders—Late Hellenistic and Coptic, V-VI century
35. Garment inserts—Late Hellenistic and Coptic, IV-V century
36. Pictured insert, Gobelin technique—Late Hellenistic, III-IV century
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38. Borders and garment inserts—Late Hellenistic and Coptic, V-VI century
39. Tunics—Late Hellenistic, IV-V century
40. Ornamental border, Knitted woollen work—Late Hellenistic, IV-V century
41. Ornamental border, Knitted woollen work—Late Hellenistic, IV-V century
42. Garment inserts and ornamental borders—Late Hellenistic, V-VI century
43. Tunic—Late Hellenistic, IV-V century
44. Tunic insert—Knitted woollen work, Late Hellenistic, IV-V century
45. Tunic insert—Knitted woollen work, Late Hellenistic, V-VI century
46. Tunics—Late Hellenistic and Coptic, IV-VI century
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51. Patterned fabrics, garment inserts and borders—Coptic, V-VII century
52. Ornamental border, with picture: "The Scouts"—Knitted woollen work, Coptic, VI-VII century
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72. Woven woollen fabrics. Coptic, V-VI century
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74. Coptic silk fabrics from Achmim, VI century
75. Late antique silk stuffs from Antinoë, VI century
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81. Linen fabric with knitted silk stripes, XII century
82. Linen fabric and child's dress of linen, with silk embroidery, XIV century
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